

Ms Ankita Malik

Associate Professor in English Govt. College,

Bahadurgarh, Haryana, India

ankitabeniwal@gmail.com

Chick lit as a Trajectory of Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*: An Indian Perspective

French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) has been hailed as a prominent figure of French postmodern theory. He is one of those prime intellectual minds of the postmodern world whose work combines philosophy, social theory and distinctive cultural concepts which reflect on the sociology of the present era. He has been a sharp critic of present day society and thoughts. Baudrillard has commented on the sociological, anthropological and cultural phenomena of the contemporary era, where the significance of class, gender and race has mutated in the light of postmodern consumerist and technologically advanced society. His works and analysis of signs and everyday life in a historical framework of 1920's to 1960's stress on the classical Marxist ideology of capitalist development where the focus of the new economic standards was on managing consumption and creating needs for new prestigious goods.

Baudrillard's works are an extension of Marxist ideology, particularly close to the Frankfurt school of thought, especially Theodore Adorno. In *The Consumer Society*, his argument is that a social structure where anything and everything can be bought or sold as a commodity, the alienation is absolute. He borrows a phrase from Marcuse "the end of transcendence" where the perception of real needs and possibility of substitute ways of life, is remote.

This paper intentionally overlaps the content of Indian Chick Lit and Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*, with the sociological and anthropological scenario of India as a consumer society. On one hand it validates that the signs and structures of a consumer's society are universal irrespective of the cultural backdrop, on the other it tries to create a certain sense of meaning to Indian Chick Lit in the arenas of Contemporary Literature. The Sub Genre of Chick Lit was once dismissed as 'froth' by Bainbridge, is now proving to be a record keeper of the changing societal norms.

Chick Lit as a genre can be investigated as a site for cultural globalization. India had its tryst with globalization in the 90's, it is no coincidence that chick lit found its ground in India around 2005 with Rajshree's *Trust Me*. Indian chick lit texts has not been given much importance from an academic point of view but it provides a unique flavour of the popular mindset, especially that of women. There are critics who have ignored the prime concerns in the novels and reject it merely as popular literature for women who relish consumer culture but this view escapes the genre's imbibing of present socio-culture realities of women, and in turn, of the society. Although, Indian Literature in English, in Asha Kasbekar's view "Cannot be construed as part of a popular or mass culture. However even the low percentage of literacy in English represents between 20 and 30 million people who can speak and read English" (Kasbekar 77). Popular English literature is certainly making sense to critics who want to study Indian urbanscapes comprising elite as well as the ambitious and much revered 'middle class'.

Consumerism has created a space of reinforcement and change in the social status for people in the urban, contemporary India where the demography is displaying an emergence of educated and career oriented women. It is the evolution of a new social identity where the status symbols and materialistic goods are dynamically metamorphosing the bounds of an individual/identity in the society.

With the education and professional careers, the 'new age women' (Oza, 199) have come up as vital participants in the world of consumption by making deliberate lifestyle choices. Consumption in modern India with its changing patterns of socio-economic landscape is a pivotal experience for the assessment of consumerist patterns within the societal structures. India has emerged as an economy with constantly rising affluence levels, the increase in disposable income and a substantial consumer sophistication is also simultaneously giving rise to the awareness in the social consciousness. According to the Times of India article "Hey Ms. Spender", based on a BCG study,

Indian Women Work an average 41 hrs a week, which is higher than the global average of 39; they place more importance on knowledge and achievement (while overall respondents valued love the highest, followed by honesty). When we focus the spotlight on India, the 565 million strong female population is a magnet for products and service giants, the landscape gets even more exciting. (Singh & Zacharia)

Veblen's *The Theory of Leisure Class* (1899) gave a term 'conspicuous consumption' which was a mode of ostentatious display of a person's wealth, which in turn, is a platform for never ending possibilities of social forms where the identity is recognised in terms of mass-produced objects. It exists in the reproduction of luxury models by nouveau riches and fuelled by globalization, i.e. buying things which have no meaning for them. Globalization speaks of a new language where the consumers are encouraged to make a show of the acquired objects as a kind of prop which will be considered as an extension of his identity rather sometimes going to the extent of replicating the identity in terms of consumer goods. The 'new age consumerism' in India has heralded an era where the huge department stores, malls and the unbounded, undeterred imaginations of the advertising industry has converted markets into 'wonderlands' where the items for sale have taken a sublime character in the lies of consumers.

The Chick Lit texts have the potential of displaying the change taking place in lives of Indian Women. Indian Chick Lit is an arena of tussle between the 'tradition' and the more acceptable 'Western' values and life styles. In Chick Lit all the social and human relationships are dynamically engaged by consumer goods and are depicted as investments. Chick Lit has successfully recorded the objects of mass-production and how this system has implied to democratizing the luxury, and also, as a synopsis of the global market and distribution. The protagonists in Chick Lit texts are highly immersed in this world of pleasures and gave a broad spectrum of varied patterns of consumption resulting into the formation of identities and lifestyles. Baudrillard's basic premise is that the individual's pursuit of identity and happiness is through objects, and hence, the only mode of satiation is consumption. Consumers are not the ones who need the product, on the contrary, the producers condition the needs' of consumer to their accord. Baudrillard's see it as a mesh of real needs and conditioned needs, "The pleasure obtained from a television or a second home is experienced as 'real' freedom. No one experience this as alienation" (Baudrillard 40). In Sonia Singh's *Goddess for Hire*, the protagonist, Maya Mehra lives in Newport Beach where "streets are wide, cars are expensive, bodies are beautiful and neighborhoods are well tended" (Singh 1). She drives a canary yellow Hummer H2, and thinks 'about upgrading to a bigger car'. Baudrillard's "luxurious and spectacular penury" (Baudrillard 6) in which "the humans ... Are surrounded not so much by other human beings ... But by objects" (Baudrillard 25) is very much on display in chick lit texts where the symbolic regimen of consumption is punctuated with instances of living in a consumer-oriented world. Maya in *Goddess for Hire* keeps on referring to the various labels and brands of the fashion world "Sanjay handed me my Kate Spade Bag and I made a quick examination to see if all the contents were there, one M.A.C. Compact, two M.A.C. lipsticks, one matte, one frost, cell phone, keys, wallets and silver Mont Blanc pen. Check" (Singh 20). Rather than describing the character's lives in terms of structural emotional and familial

surrounding Chick lit writers surround them with objects and possessions. Baudrillard's view that happiness is "measurable in terms of objects and signs" is widely manifested in chick lits.

Chick Lit heroines possess the wealth needed to engage in a pre-meditated construction of identity mirrored through a highly utopian state of consumption. They become the subjects of a larger social implication of the globalized world where the objects of mass production can be afforded by the working class and in how it creates a performing identity. Maya Claims, "I was quite the impulsive shopper. I'm sure my soul figured this particular dharma deal sounded pretty cool and glamorous. I bit my lip. Life was not a 50 – percent- off sale. But if it were, I was having the most critical case of buyer's remorse ever" (Singh 67).

It is worth noticing in India, that a qualitative shift in the methods of production has an impact on the structure of most individuals living within this process. The society has gone through a considerable shift where the utility characteristic of production is taking a back seat, whereas the product is a mere-prop and obtains a sociological significance. Baudrillard argues that modern economies are 'growth' economies, where poverty and excess grow structurally to maintain itself as a growth economy. It is a system of signs where needs come from competition, not requirement. Needs become endless, limitless, which leads to mystifying the lived experience to the stark truth to facilitate the growth system. The desire to be distinct feels justifiable at every moment. In *Keep the Change* by Nirupama Subramanian, the protagonist, Damayanti compares her life to her counter- imagined self-Victoria, whom she conveys, "I envy you, Vic. I can see you in your short skirt and long boots, on the arms of your latest Hugh Grant lookalike, sashaying into the Rita Carlton, tossing down a strawberry daiquiri and a Snack before heading off to shake your shapely legs out in the hottest little club in town" (Subramanian 4). The fetish for objects and the desire for materiality becomes the prime pursuit of life in chick lit texts (not to forget the chase for an eligible bachelor) and is mirrored in the society which is so overwhelmingly influenced by the sermons of advertising. Celebrity

lifestyles are propagated and the blind quest for ownership of the same lifestyles becomes the driving force.

Most of the Chick Lit texts are panoramas of the anthropological and sociological changes witnessed by the society in terms of “commodity fetishisms”, the texts perfectly document the grave subjective distortions/changes which are a consequence of unbridled materialism. Indian Chick Lit is an effort to record the lived experiences of a female mind which is mediating its way through object gratification and complexities of taste. Baudrillard claims that the two ‘buzzwords’ of consumer society, “environment” and “ambience” have “only enjoyed such a vogue since we have come to live not so much alongside human beings ... beneath the mute gaze of mesmerizing, obedient objects” (Baudrillard 25). The idea is very much witnessed in the Indian Chick Lit. In India where the public and communal areas seem to be corrupt and insecure the chick lit writers intention of providing a Backdrop of star-rated hotels, corporate offices, clubs, lounges giving a feel of controlled living space-and devaluing the presence of people in favour of ambience and décor. In Advaita Kala’s *Almost Single*, the protagonist, Aisha works in a five star hotel as Guest Relation Manager, she introduces herself by exerting, “I dine at five-star luxury hotels, and stay at five-star hotels during my travels, name old and new world wines with great élan...” (Kala 4). It echoes the mindset of India where the attraction for balconies and second homes, large villas stamps the increase in size of one’s territory. This age of physical demonstration validates that the larger one’s place, the higher the status in the society.

The objectives of mass production have not only given rise to democratization of consumption where the purpose of reaching the masses as well as sensitising the fantasy of an individual has well served the marketing and advertising industry. The desire of consumption has seeped into the minds of working class resulting into the following of markets with replicas

of high end products. This can be treated as the borgeoising the forms of consumption. The idea of 'brand' is most centripetal to the consumer society. A sneak peak at the markets of cosmopolitan societies be it Delhi or Mumbai will make the fact clear how people have taken to the means of buying fake items in the wake of satiating their desire of owning a luxury brand. In the year 2014, the most searched brand by google India was Micheal Kors – a high end luxury brand for leather goods and coincidentally the markets were floods with the faux replicas of the same brand. Appadurai's emphasis on the fetish component of the global flow implies that the more an individual feels withdrawn in a cosmopolitan/urban society there is a great possibility to, "construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic [and] even fantastic objects" (Appadurai 297). The transition in the mindsets of the women is linked with their attitudes and responses towards the market as a mental scape. It is perceived as a platform for the individual where one can in views of Firat (1999) 'pick and mix' and makes consumption a mode of satiating one's desires and pleasures.

The Indian women as witnessed in this neo-liberal society is trying to validate and employ individual meanings to resolve about who they are and how they desire to be perceived by the world. Allison James notes "how embodying identities in a multiplex fashion, they offer ways of embracing otherness, of confronting the global through the localized, even personal..., a way of living a local life with and through global imagery" (James 92). The concept of identity is taking a paradigmatic shift in the form of 'status' in the light of consumption where "the objects merely simulate the social essence". Women have taken centre stage and enjoying this newly found power of buying and negotiating in items of "seeking self-realisation or self-expression through goods rather than through spiritual or social pursuits, which leads to the evaluation of individual on the basis of material possessions rather than other (higher) aspects of their person" (Wessel 95).

The Chick Lit and their protagonists are negotiating and documenting the change and shift in the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society. The perception of women is constantly changing with the advertising world and globalized levels providing the much required boost to their image. The freedom, exercised as a consumer, makes consumption as the juncture where women, transform their identity and manifest it through a new form of orientation, which is a classic mix of “ethnic’ and ‘western’. These hybrid identities are becoming the voice of the new-age women. The images of popular culture where women are shedding their inhibitions and express their power through the commodities they purchase or a specific life style they adopt. In mainstream movie ‘Khoobsurat’ (2014) Sonam Kapoor (a popular Bollywood actress) makes a statement of this new found liberation by saying, “Jimmy Choo ki nok pe rakhi duniya sari hai”, (the world lies on the tip of a Jimmy Choo shoe) echoing the sentiments of urban middle class who is constructing new ideals of a globalized self. In the Indian perspective, chick lit is not only narrates Indian Women consumer behaviors’, but also a synthesis of contemporary social fabric. It provides a centrality of the role of women in their pursuit of Indian modernity and in turn creating consumerism as ‘modern national culture’ (Manrekar 106). As a product of popular culture, chick lit texts are agencies demonstrating feminine behaviors, fashionable ways and use of products as signs of assertion.

Characters in Indian Chick lit spend a huge amount of time on their bodies. Maya in Goddess for Hire spends her afternoon, “enjoying a manicure and pedicure at the Bella Salon and Spa, followed by shopping” (Singh 2). Baudrillard proposes that the body feels ‘liberated’ through constant attention because, “it has to be ‘liberated, emancipated to be able to exploited for productivist ends”. Baudrillard claims, “In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY” (Baudrillard 129). The body is everywhere, be it the world of advertisements, the euphoria of

fashion, the obsessions of hygiene and diets, and the ultimate goal to be achieved of being youthful and SLIM. It has become the “object of salvation”. ‘Body beautiful’ has been fetish for times immemorial but somehow in India in the postmodern world it has found its assertion after the magical years of liberalization. It can easily explain the presence of gyms on every nook and corner of the society. One of the cult changes in Indian mindset came with Kareena Kapoor’s (A popular Bollywood actress) propagating and showcasing her Zero-sized figure. The idea of Zero-figure gained phenomenal validity in the Indian society giving rise to the advertising campaigns of corn flakes, green teas and other products claiming healthy diet. Baudrillard sees body in the consumerist society as both a “Capital” and a “Fetish”. Most of the Indian Chick Lit novels are the perfect interpretation of this aspect of consumer society. In *Almost Single*, the “Cleansing, toning and moisturizing are her three steps to Nirvana” (Kala 7). The heroines now and then fix appointments for solons and the ultimate quest is for that perfect brand new outfit. It is a never ending marathon to achieve the perfect weight. References to new diet plans, need for new clothes, new accessories become the order of the day. The dominant principles of advertising industry procreate with the functional body and resultant is “no longer ‘flesh’ as in the religious conception, or labour power, as in industrial logic but is taken up in its materiality...” (Baudrillard 132). The advertising world has grabbed this opportunity and provides methods to ‘liberate’ the BODY by joining gyms, personal trainers, putting numerous lotions and cosmetics- i.e. by objects and keep on asserting that,” the only drive that is really liberated is the drive to buy” (Baudrillard 135).

In most of the Indian Chick lit texts, the ethos of consumer society as a unified sign is present, “the ambivalence of desire... is split apart” (Baudrillard 184) where the affirmatives are evident in the satiation of consumption but the gloomy side is that consumption has an unending desire associated with it, for something which is yet to be owned “Censored by satisfaction itself, and ... crystallise into a gigantic fund of anxiety” (Baudrillard 176). The

dissatisfaction, the shallowness, the dark, violent, evil aspect of a consumer world results into an alienated human being. Now and then, we, the globalized citizens witness these pools of “Fatigue, depression and neuroses [that is] always convertible into violence” (Baudrillard 182) breaking down. The replacement of victimization by the consumerist ideology can be witnessed in most of the chick lit texts. The protagonists break the shackles of commodity worship and achieve a state of heightened emotional level, which brings a sense of complicity to the readers. In *Almost Single*, Aisha exclaims, “So we are together then? Together, because we love each other company? Not because we are bound to do the right thing or what’s expected?” (Kala 281).

Baudrillard concludes, in a very apocalyptic manner, where the commodity aspect replaces all other drives of life but chick lit does give a meek message of renouncing consumerism and relying on the old ways of life- sans make-up, sans afflicted affluence. Nirupama Subramanian in *Keep the Change* makes its point by conveying, “I was vaguely aware of the world whirling around me, other people’s voices, sounds of laughter and a blur of colours, but was more aware that something was swirling and churning within me” (Subramanian 356).

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